

CONVERSION

To be converted is to undergo a change of direction. This is the essential core of the imagery surrounding conversion in the Bible. While the term itself is rarely used in the Bible, stories of conversion are prominent, chiefly in the NT. OT counterparts are heathens who reject their own traditions in order to embrace the Jewish faith and God. The common denominator in all of the biblical references to conversion is that the individual recognizes his or her need for the one true God and rejects all other alternatives. Typically this action is referred to as “having faith.” Biblical synonyms for conversion include repentance, receiving salvation and believing. The biblical imagery accompanying conversion is consistently one of dramatic change; thus those who always believed or always knew of God are not referred to as converts. The children of Israel and Jesus’ disciples in his lifetime never had clear moments of conversion recorded in the Bible, although clearly the same faith was necessary.

We read about godly men and women in the OT, but we catch few glimpses of conversions. Jacob’s life was so changed by his encounter with God in his wrestling match at the brook Jabbok (Gen 32:22–32) that it can be regarded as a conversion story. The call and obedience of Abraham to leave his father’s house and religion constituted a change of life so radical as to be a conversion—a change of direction, with a drastic new ritual of circumcision as the accompanying sign (Gen 17). Thereafter, those who wished to become Jewish proselytes and accept the God of Abraham were also circumcised. Circumcision was thus the OT symbol for conversion to a belief in God, signifying the accompanying dramatic change in the individual’s life.

Other OT examples of conversion involved not only a change in the individual’s religion but a change in culture and lifestyle as well. Rahab is the first recorded proselyte. According to Hebrews, the necessary factor was that she had faith, which she demonstrated by calling the Hebrew God “God in heaven above and on earth below” (Josh 2:11 NRSV; cf. Heb 11:31). Because she acted on her confession by hiding the spies, she and her family were saved and became a part of the nation of Israel. Another OT convert was Ruth, who abandoned her own people and gods to follow her mother-in-law from her native Moab to Israel. In her statement of faith she declared, “Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God” (Ruth 1:16 NRSV). Thus Ruth too believed God and converted to the Hebrew religion.

The OT also contains stories of foreign rulers or peoples who believed God or who repented from their sins for his sake, but who are not cited as converting to Judaism. In this category are the people of Nineveh, who repented from their wickedness at Jonah’s warning, and King Darius of Persia, who, convinced by Daniel’s miraculous survival of the lions’ den, made a law demanding that his kingdom worship “the living God,” whose

NT NT. New Testament

OT OT. Old Testament

NRSV NRSV. New Revised Standard Version

cf. cf.. compare

“dominion will be forever” (Dan 6:26). Similarly, God humbled King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to a confession of faith by sending a period of madness upon him for seven years (Dan 6). At the end of this time Nebuchadnezzar praised God as “the Most High ... who lives forever” (Dan 4:34). These people repented of unbelief and sin and confessed a faith in God. If they indeed held onto that faith, then they could be considered among those believers who “hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:21). More ambiguous is the case of Naaman. After he was healed of leprosy under Elisha’s direction, he took earth from Israel back home with him, in keeping with ancient belief that linked deities with specific regions, but he also asked pardon for bowing with his master in the house of Rimmon (2 Kings 5:17–19).

The NT contains a far more vivid picture of conversion. The chief symbol of conversion is baptism. Such a symbol is two-fold, for it is at once the literal baptism in water that Jesus called for in the Great Commission and also the baptism in the Holy Spirit, which is the seal of the new believer’s faith and salvation (Mt 28:19; Eph 1:3). In addition to this symbol Jesus refers to conversion in symbolic illustrative language. He calls it being born again of water and the Holy Spirit (Jn 3:5), moving from darkness to light (Jn 3:21), drinking from the living water that is himself and having rivers of living water flowing from the believer’s own heart (Jn 7:38), and moving from death into life (Jn 11:25). In addition he illustrates conversion with the parable of the sower, claiming that those who believe are like the good soil in which the seeds grow successfully (Lk 8:5–15). This bearing of fruit is illustrative of those who “when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance” (Lk 8:15 NRSV)

The most paradigmatic conversion story in the Bible is that of Paul (Acts 9:1–22; 22:1–16)—a story so famous that to this day we speak of a “Damascus road experience” as a metaphor for sudden conversion. At its core it is a story of a person’s life totally reversed—from a zeal to persecute Christians to a zeal to preach the gospel. The imagery of the conversion itself highlights its dramatic nature, with a flashing light that blinded Paul, a falling to the ground in submission, a miraculous accusing voice from heaven, temporary blindness, a speechless group of onlookers and the subsequent falling of scales from the eyes of the convert. The immediate result is boldness in proclaiming Jesus. The essential motifs stand silhouetted: a personal and overpowering encounter with Christ, submission to God, a casting off of something (picturing as losing a weight or impediment), senses heightened, vision restored, the washing of baptism to symbolize cleansing from sin, and a new lifestyle and values.

Although the most radical conversion story is that of Paul, many other examples of conversion appear in the NT. Among them are Cornelius, the first Gentile convert (Acts 10); the jailer converted by Paul and Silas (Acts 16:13); Zacchaeus, the tax-collector (Lk 19:1–10); the thief on the cross next to Jesus (Lk 23:39–43); and the many people, both Jews and Gentiles, converted at Pentecost and subsequently (Acts 2:38–41). Some of these converts believed directly because of Jesus’ words and miracles, and others believed because of the apostles’ words. Yet one of their common bonds was that they were often the most unlikely to have been saved. Often they were Gentiles who had never

heard of the God of Israel or sinners whose actions were obvious and repulsive to those around them. As John comments, very few of the righteous Pharisees believed in Christ (Jn 7:48). Thus the essential element in each of these converts appears to have been a willingness to recognize sinfulness, to abandon all past beliefs and to believe the gospel in its entirety. Jesus reminds the Pharisees of that, commenting that clearly the chief priests did not believe all that Moses had said or else they would have believed him (Jn 5:46).

Mention must be made, finally, of NT characters who refuse conversion when it is offered to them. This is the implied state of those who reject Christ's claims in the Gospels, focused most clearly in the case of the rich young man who "went away sorrowful" (Mt 19:22 RSV; Mk 10:22) because he could not meet the demand of conversion, namely, to give up his riches. Equally memorable is the great refusal-King Agrippa, who dismisses Paul's presentation of the gospel with a statement in Acts 26:28 that is variously translated as "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian" (KJV) and "In a short time you think to make me a Christian!" (RSV).

Conversion is above all an initiation-an entry into something new. It also involves reversal-a casting off of the old and embracing of the new. It is a cataclysmic event in the life of the convert. Conversion focuses on the moment (even if long in preparation), and it portrays the person at a crossroads. It involves a turn of direction in a person's life and is the supreme example of the biblical motif of newness (*see* NEW), best expressed in the classic passage: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5:17 NRSV).

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RSV RSV. Revised Standard Version

KJV KJV. King James Version (Authorized Version)

¹Ryken, Leland, Jim Wilhoit, Tremper Longman et al.; *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. electronic ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, c1998.

Conversion.

1. By God. 1Ki 18:37; Joh 6:44; Ac 21:19.
2. By Christ. Ac 3:26; Ro 15:18.
3. By the power of the Holy Spirit. Pr 1:23.
4. Is of grace. Ac 11:21,23.
5. Follows repentance. Ac 3:19; 26:20.
6. Is the result of faith. Ac 11:21.
7. Through the instrumentality of
 - a. The scriptures. Ps 19:7.
 - b. Ministers. Ac 26:18; 1Th 1:9.
 - c. Self-examination. Ps 119:59; La 3:40.
 - d. Affliction. Ps 78:34.
8. Of sinners, a cause of joy
 - a. To God. Eze 18:23; Lu 15:32.
 - b. To saints. Ac 15:3; Ga 1:23,24.
9. Is necessary. Mt 18:3.
10. Commanded. Job 36:10.
11. Exhortations to. Pr 1:23; Isa 31:6; 55:7; Jer 3:7; Eze 33:11.
12. Promises connected with. Ne 1:9; Isa 1:27; Jer 3:14; Eze 18:27.
13. Pray for. Ps 80:7; 85:4; Jer 31:18; La 5:21.
14. Is accompanied by confession of sin, and prayer. 1Ki 8:35.
15. Danger of neglecting. Ps 7:12; Jer 44:5,11; Eze 3:19.
16. Duty of leading sinners to. Ps 51:13.

17. Encouragement for leading sinners to. Da 12:3; Jas 5:19,20.
18. Of Gentiles, predicted. Isa 2:2; 11:10; 60:5; 66:12.
19. Of Israel, predicted. Eze 36:25-27.

1. Abraham	Gen. 12:1–3; 15:6
2. Jacob	Gen. 28:19–22
3. Rahab	Josh. 2:9
4. Ruth	Ruth 1:16
5. Samuel	1 Sam. 3:1–10
6. David	1 Sam. 16:13
7. Widow of Zarephath	1 Kings 17:24
8. Shunammite woman	2 Kings 4:30
9. Naaman	2 Kings 5:14–15
10. Manasseh	2 Chron. 33:10–13, 18–19
11. Cyrus	Ezra 1:2–4; Isa. 44:28
12. Nebuchadnezzar	Dan. 3:28–29; 4:1–2, 34–35, 37
13. Darius	Dan. 6:25–27
14. King of Nineveh	Jon. 3:5–9
15. A centurion	Matt. 8:10, 13
16. Matthew	Matt. 9:9
17. A Canaanite woman	Matt. 15:28
18. Another centurion	Matt. 27:54
19. The Gadarene maniac	Mark 5:15
20. A woman with internal bleeding	Mark 5:34
21. The father of a demoniac son	Mark 9:24
22. Bartimaeus	Mark 10:52
23. A scribe	Mark 12:34
24. Mary Magdalene	Mark 16:9
25. A paralytic	Luke 5:20
26. An immoral woman	Luke 7:38
27. A leper	Luke 17:12–19
28. A publican	Luke 18:13–14
29. Zacchaeus	Luke 19:8
30. A woman with an 18-year infirmity	Luke 13:12–13
31. A dying thief	Luke 23:42
32. Peter	John 1:42
33. Andrew	John 1:40
34. Philip	John 1:43
35. Nathanael	John 1:49
36. Nicodemus	John 3
37. The Samaritan woman	John 4:29

38.	A nobleman	John 4:53
39.	An adulterous woman	John 8:11
40.	A blind man	John 9:38
41.	Martha	John 11:27
42.	A lame man	Acts 3:8
43.	The Ethiopian eunuch	Acts 8:37
44.	Saul	Acts 9:6
45.	Cornelius	Acts 10:44
46.	Sergius Paulus	Acts 13:12
47.	Lydia	Acts 16:14–15
48.	A demoniac gift	Acts 16:18
49.	The Philippian jailor	Acts 16:32–34
50.	Crispus	Acts 18:8
51.	Apollos	Acts 18:24–25

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¹Willmington, H. L. *Willmington's Book of Bible Lists*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1987.